Global Civil Society
Shifting Powers in a Shifting World

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Diaspora as an instance of global governance: The case of Kurds in Sweden

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The process of globalisation, the increase in numbers of diasporan populations and transnational social movements, and the expansion of non-governmental organisations have – together with transnational capital and corporations – generated considerable interest in global governance and the role of civil society at global and transnational level. In this respect, there are certain pessimistic interpretations that view transnational civil society as a neo-liberal construction that helps to maintain the current “unequal” global order (Drainville 1998). Other scholars believe that global civil society, operating on a transnational social field at the intersection of several nation-states, is an instrumental human resource for the regulation of various political, economic, social and cultural global flows (Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor 2004).

Today, many diasporan populations – residing in Western societies – have created considerable civil society structures that function not only as a substantial means of integration in their residing societies, but also as genuine transnational institutions that aim, in one way or another, to affect the politics of their former homelands, especially in the direction of democracy, promotion of human rights and peace settlement with non-violent means. In this respect, diaspora appears as an instance of global governance and an arena of transborder citizenship.

Transnational civil society structures are the expression of various ethnic and cultural associations, social and professional institutions, online and on air arrangements, networks of personalities and celebrities in various political and cultural fields that are used by diasporan groups,
in order to cross the borders of two or more nation-states. As a result, civil society and diaspora become two interconnected notions, and diasporan groups become one of the central components of global civil society. According to Cochrane, there is a direct connection between civil society and diaspora. As diasporan groups take interest in conflict and peace-building efforts and political confrontations in their societies of origin, they should be seen not only as significant peace contributors in the study of global civil society (Cochrane 2007) but also as genuine *transborder citizens*, as they participate in the political processes, normative regimes, legal, juridical and institutional systems of both their new and old societies (Glick Schiller 2005). Likewise, transborder citizenship comparatively stands for a more modulated, multidimensional, dynamic and active form of diasporic agency (Khayati 2008). Cochrane (2007) claims that diasporan groups should be included in any analysis that contributes to peace-building and the creation of various sociocultural and political organisations in the former societies. Through their transborder civil society structures – appearing more often than not in the form of ethnic and cultural associations, social and professional institutions and networks of personalities and celebrities in various political and cultural fields – diasporan populations manage to cross the borders of two or more nation-states in order to intersect the political, legal and juridical systems of their new and old societies.

On such a transnational social field, diasporan populations participate in the normative regime, legal and institutional system and political processes of two polities; a participation which is not always painless and without dilemmas. It may be particularly problematic when the two polities arise from two different political premises and visibly represent two more and less contradictory political systems, such as democratic institutions in the countries of settlement, and non-democratic or less-developed societal organisations in the countries of origin. In such a context, transnational civil organisations of immigrant and refugee populations appear as manifestations of social energies and an awakening of human consciousness for achieving peace and democratisation in the former homelands. As such, they are often counteracted by certain social and political forces of their former societies, who see the presence of such
civil society organisations as menacing to their continued existence. For instance, global civil society movements that are working to promote gender equality, human rights or democracy in traditional societies are regularly confronted with local social forces that prefer to organise the society on the basis of political ideas that leave less room for political participation on democratic grounds.

In this respect, the case of diasporan Kurds in Sweden and their transnational relations to Iraqi Kurdistan can be considered as a relevant and illustrative empirical contour. Several researchers (Bruinessen 1999; Wahlbeck 1999, 2002; Østergaard-Nielsen 2000; Eccarius-Kelly 2002; Griffiths 2002; Alinia 2004; Emanuelsson 2005; Khayati 2008) maintain that Kurdish diaspora in the West acts more and more as a networked and homeland-oriented political activist organisation. According to Vera Eccarius-Kelly (2002), those diasporan Kurds who participate in social organisations in Western Europe display the typical characteristics of “social movement organisations” (term borrowed from Charles Tilly), suggesting that they consider themselves as legitimate representatives of other diasporan members, as they publicly push for the recognition of their agenda, develop connections with allied actors and seek new political opportunities for achieving acceptance. In so doing, diasporan groups attempt to affect not only the general integration policies of the residing states in their own favour, but also the general opinion of those societies in favour of the politics of their former homelands. For instance, in Sweden, diasporan Kurds create their associations and informal networks in order to use them not only as a supplementary resource to solve the problems arising from insufficient integration policies in Sweden, but also as genuine mobilisation platforms that are largely oriented toward their societies of origin (Wahlbeck 1999). In this regard, the Kurds in Sweden, who compose a socially and politically diversified diasporan population, effectively make use of the favourable Swedish political context in order to develop their diasporic structures in the form of a multitude of transnational arrangements, social networks, associations, women organisations, satellite TV and radio stations, publishing houses, internet and cyberspace platforms, and cultural settings that make them able to be among of the most active diaspora in the country (Khayati 2008).
Depicting the impact of the Kurdish transnational civil society organisations in Sweden on the Kurdish homeland implies that we should, as well, actualise a number of fundamental changes that Kurdish society at large has been undergoing in recent years. The most essential of these changes is the emergence of the *de facto* Kurdish state in northern Iraq since 1992, which exerts considerable influence on not only how Kurds sustain their ethno-national identity, but also on how they create their diasporic structures in their societies of residence. The transnational connections between diasporan Kurds in Sweden and Finland and Iraqi Kurdistan account for a set of various experiences that are progressively generating a new consciousness, new “shared images of cosmos” (Keane 2003) and new transnational civil society dispositions among them. For instance, in the Iraqi Kurdistan legislative elections that took place on 25 July 2009, diasporan Kurds in Sweden and Finland played a considerable role, as they actively worked to establish appropriate structures (meetings, associations, chat rooms, internet sites, etc.) in favor of the main oppositional group (Change List, *Listî Goran*); a reform-oriented group which essentially addressed what it saw as corruption and undemocratic ruling methods undertaken by the two dominant Kurdish parties KDP and PUK. Change List received the considerable 25 percent of the Kurdish vote. At present, influenced by popular revolutions in the Arab and Islamic world in Northern Africa and the Middle East, followed by fundamental rapid political changes, diasporan Kurds in Sweden push actively for similar societal and political transformations in Iraqi Kurdistan. In this regard, a set of transnational organisations, networks, chat-rooms, websites and discussion fora have been created, a number of Swedish political personalities and organisations have been contacted, and several demonstrations have been organised in different Swedish towns and cities.

References


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